

NCA  
VOC FOR PGM/FN  
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5947  
WAYNE COREY/HONG KONG

JUNE 27, 1978

ANATOMY OF AN ESCAPE: ONE MAN'S STORY

ANNCR:

ALTHOUGH THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES HAVE FLED FROM VIETNAM IN SMALL FISHING BOATS SINCE THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER THREE YEARS AGO, THE DANGERS AND TRIALS THEY FACE MAY NOT BE FULLY UNDERSTOOD. THE DANGERS AND SHEER TERROR ENDURED BY ONE REFUGEE WHO RECENTLY LEFT ARE RECOUNTED IN THIS REPORT BY VOA'S WAYNE COREY IN HONG KONG.

VOICE:

WE CANNOT MENTION HIS REAL NAME BECAUSE HE FEELS HIS FRIENDS IN HO CHI MINH CITY -- FORMERLY SAIGON -- COULD SUFFER FROM COMMUNIST REPRISALS. BUT HERE IS THE STORY OF ONE MAN -- AN OFFICER IN THE DEFEATED SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY, WHO SAFELY REACHED A NON-COMMUNIST SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRY AND WHO WILL SOON JOIN HIS RELATIVES IN CALIFORNIA.

AFTER SPENDING ONE AND A HALF YEARS IN A COMMUNIST RE-EDUCATION CAMP HE BECAME A LABORER IN THE FORMER SOUTH VIETNAMESE CAPITAL. IT WAS THE ONLY WORK HE COULD FIND BECAUSE HE WAS TAINTED BY HIS CONNECTIONS WITH THE NON-COMMUNIST ARMY. HIS DAILY PAY WAS NOT ENOUGH FOR HIM TO BUY RICE AND OTHER FOOD. BUT FRIENDS HELPED HIM TO SURVIVE. HOWEVER, IN EARLY MAY HE RECEIVED THE DREADED ORDERS THAT HE MUST SOON REPORT TO A "NEW ECONOMIC ZONE" IN THE COUNTRYSIDE WHERE HE BELIEVED HE WOULD DIE BECAUSE OF THE HARSH CONDITIONS.

WITH THE HELP OF A DISTANT RELATIVE AND AN ELDERLY MAN WHO HAD SOME MONEY, HE FLED TO THE VIETNAMESE PORT OF VUNG TAU AND ARRANGED TO JOIN MORE THAN FORTY OTHER VIETNAMESE WHO WANTED TO ESCAPE FROM THEIR COUNTRY.

HE AND THE OLD MAN PLANNED TO USE A SMALL BOAT TO REACH A FISHING TRAWLER SOME DISTANCE OUT AT SEA. BUT AS THEY WERE ABOUT TO LEAVE UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS, A SEARCHLIGHT FROM A COMMUNIST PATROL BOAT SCANNED THE SHORE. HE AND THE OLD MAN, FEARING DISCOVERY AND ARREST, HID IN THE JUNGLE ALL NIGHT SHIVERING IN THE CONSTANT RAIN. THE FOLLOWING MORNING THE TWO MEN, ALREADY EXHAUSTED AND HUNGRY, REACHED THE FISHING BOAT WHICH HAD ONLY ENOUGH GASOLINE TO REACH INTERNATIONAL WATERS.

THE REFUGEES ONLY HOPE WAS TO RECEIVE AID FROM PASSING SHIPS. FOR TWO DAYS, WITHOUT FOOD OR WATER, THEY WAITED. SEVERAL SHIPS IGNORED THEM, BUT THEN ONE DREW UP ALONG SIDE. IT WAS FROM NORTH KOREA AND THE NORTH KOREANS THREATENED TO TOW THE REFUGEES BOAT BACK TO VIETNAM. THE VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND CHILDREN BEGAN TO CRY. THE NORTH KOREANS FINALLY RELENTED AND EVEN GAVE THE REFUGEES SOME FOOD, WATER AND GASOLINE. THE REFUGEES HEADED SOUTH UNTIL THEY RAN OUT OF FOOD. THE SUN WAS HOT AND THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH SHELTER SO THE MEN OCCASIONALLY JUMPED INTO THE SEA TO COOL OFF. BUT THEY REFUSED TO DRINK THE SEA WATER, KNOWING IT WOULD MEAN EVENTUAL DEATH.

IN THE NICK OF TIME AN INDONESIAN SHIP GAVE THE REFUGEES MORE FOOD THAN THEY COULD EAT. REFRESHED AND STRENGTHENED THEY SET OFF AGAIN TO THE SOUTH AND REACHED AN INDONESIAN ISLAND. THEY WERE PERMITTED TO STAY THERE OVERNIGHT TO REST BUT WERE FORCED TO LEAVE THE FOLLOWING DAY. THIS TIME THEY HEADED NORTH AND FINALLY REACHED MALAYSIA WHERE THEY WERE ALLOWED TO ENTER A VIETNAMESE REFUGEE CAMP.

THE FORMER SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY OFFICER SAYS THAT DURING MOST OF THE TWO-WEEK VOYAGE, HE AND THE OTHER REFUGEES FEARED DEATH FROM STARVATION, EXPOSURE, OR FROM DROWNING AT SEA IN

CASE OF A STORM. FORTUNATELY, HE SAYS, THE WATER REMAINED ABSOLUTELY CALM. HE SAYS HE DID NOT REALIZE HOW DIFFICULT THE SEA ESCAPE WOULD BE AND THAT HE MIGHT NOT HAVE TRIED IT IF HE HAD KNOWN THAT DEATH WOULD BE A DAILY THREAT.

YET THIS REFUGEE AND MANY LIKE HIM FEAR THAT THEIR FUTURE IN VIETNAM WOULD BE FULL OF MISERY ANYWAY AND THAT BECAUSE OF FOOD SHORTAGES AND LACK OF MONEY THEY WOULD DIE EARLY DEATHS IF THEY STAYED IN THEIR HOMELAND.

WJL/PY